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The Frontline Supervisor

*Helping You Manage Your Company's
Most Valuable Resource - Employees*

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◆ I would like to reduce negativity among my staff. There was a time when we were a happy and motivated group of people. Now the common pattern is morale and attitude problems. How can I break this cycle?

◆ My employee has made a great turnaround in her performance. I am hesitant to praise her because I am worried she will assume I am no longer watchful. Should I praise her for what she does or warn her to keep up the good work?

◆ We are referring an employee to the EAP because of his performance problems. I have more influence than the immediate supervisor because I am the head manager. Wouldn't it be better for me to take over, make the EAP referral, and manage the performance?

Negativity is like the flu: It's contagious. It is also expensive because it costs work organizations millions of dollars in lost productivity. To reduce workplace negativity, you must determine its cause. Start by taking a look at your leadership style to see if there are contributing factors. Common leadership-related causes of negativity in the workplace include the real or perceived absence of managers from the daily work of employees, inadequate or untimely performance evaluations, and/or a lack of manager vision that guides the work. Fear of failure and criticism can inhibit managers from creating a vision with measurable goals. Fear of conflict may cause performance evaluations to be delayed or avoided. Unresolved conflicts may precipitate growing isolation by the manager away from establishing meaningful working relationships with employees. Unfortunately, unmanageable conflict in the form of a negative workplace is often the result of avoiding any of these leadership tasks.

Most employees respond well to positive feedback, so experience would support providing it. If you are concerned about how your employee might interpret positive feedback, consider holding a private meeting. You can then give the encouragement she needs while emphasizing that you expect the improved quality of her performance to continue. If your employee has a history of inconsistent work quality, doing this may be particularly important. If you do not give your employee positive feedback, the lack of communication may be interpreted as indifference on your part. This could precipitate a return to problems. The meeting with your employee gives you an opportunity to reinforce her improvement, identify future obstacles to her success, and hold her accountable for the job expected of her.

When performance problems of employees are severe, upper level managers are sometimes tempted to take control of the supervisor referral, eliminating the immediate supervisor from a monitoring role. Effectively, this may decrease an employee's motivation to improve work performance because his or her relationship with the supervisor is unfavorably altered. That is, reduced oversight may lead an anxious employee to elicit support from the supervisor, who in turn may become sympathetic and minimize the seriousness of the employee's performance problems or the legitimacy of upper management's actions. Such supervisors typically believe their authority has been diminished or that the organization does not trust them to supervise their employees. This can cause the supervisor to undermine employee motivation to improve performance or correct an attitude problem.

◆ I can see that employees with compulsive gambling problems might be at risk for stealing from the employer, but what other problems of compulsive gamblers could affect the workplace?

Compulsive gambling is a serious and complex problem recognized for more than twenty years by the American Psychiatric Association as a diagnosable and treatable illness. Many of its symptoms can affect productivity. Although stealing from the workplace to get money for gambling is often discussed as a problem of some compulsive gamblers, time theft (conducting other activities on paid time) can be an even more costly problem. Other problems include being chronically late for work, having unexplained absences from work, leaving work early to gamble or place a bet, using sick days when one is well, and taking long lunch hours and breaks. Making frequent personal calls during work hours and scheduling appointments away from the work site in order to gamble, arguing with coworkers about money owed to them, having wages garnished, and being late for appointments and meetings are also common problems.

◆ I smelled alcohol on my employee's breath —drinking on the job is prohibited by company policy. Rather than have him tested under the "reasonable suspicion" provisions, I confronted him. I haven't smelled alcohol on his breath since. Was this a suitable approach?

Your question is both a policy matter and EAP related. You should ask your personnel or human resources department about acting outside the policy's guidelines. The organization's policy is designed to protect the organization and help employees with potential addiction problems. Confronting your employee instead of following the policy's guidelines may therefore be problematic. Here's why: Most addicted employees will alter their drinking pattern or decrease their consumption after being confronted, but resume drinking again after a short period of temporary control. This behavior is consistent with the nature of the illness. Typically, after a period of self-imposed abstinence or cutting back, the employee's drinking may actually increase, adding to the risk faced by your organization. Admittedly, it can be uncomfortable carrying out your company's "reasonable suspicion policy," particularly if you know the employee well. Remember though, steps you take to protect your employee are "enabling" behaviors that may reinforce an addictive illness if it exists.

Notes:

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